NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
NEWS ANALYSIS 1-1829 NOVEMBER 16, 1976
CHARLES MEDD

PLAINS' BAPTIST CHURCH TAKES A VOTE

ANNCR:

THE CONGREGATION OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF PLAINS, GEORGIA TOOK A VOTE THIS PAST SUNDAY, AND THE OUTCOME WAS PLEASING TO THE CHURCH'S BEST-KNOWN MEMBER, AS CHARLES MEDD EXPLAINS.

VOICE:

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE "ONLY-IN-AMERICA" SCENES, THE KIND OF SETTING THAT HOLLYWOOD MOVIE PRODUCERS DREAM OF. OUTSIDE THE TINY, CLAPBOARD CHURCH ABOUT ONE THOUSAND SPECTATORS WAITED IN A COLD, WINTER RAIN AS TELEVISION CAMERAS PANNED AND PROBED FOR POSSIBLE ACTION. BUT THE MOST LIKELY PROSPECTS -- A HANDFUL OF BLACK POWER MILITANTS AND THEIR WHITE COUNTERPARTS, KU KLUX KLANSMEN -- PRODUCED NOTHING BUT A FEW SHOUTING MATCHES.

THEY WAITED FOR THREE AND ONE-HALF HOURS AS SOME TWO HUNDRED MEMBERS OF THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH ARGUED, DEBATED AND THEN VOTED ON THE TWIN ISSUES OF THE DAY -- WHETHER OR NOT TO ALLOW BLACKS TO WORSHIP AT THE ALL-WHITE PARISH AND WHETHER TO RETAIN THE YOUNG MINISTER WHO SAID THEY SHOULD. THE VERDICT WAS SIGNALED WHEN THE CHURCH'S BEST-KNOWN MEMBER EMERGED WITH HIS FAMILIAR SMILE. BY A TWO-TO-ONE MARGIN, THE CENTURY-OLD CHURCH POLICY OF RACIAL SEGREGATION WAS OVER, AND THE MINISTER WHO OPPOSED IT WOULD STAY ON.

FOR JIMMY CARTER, THE VOTE MAY NOT HAVE BEEN AS IMPORTANT AS THE ONE TAKEN NATIONALLY ON NOVEMBER SECOND, BUT IT WAS NONETHELESS RICH IN SYMBOLIC VALUE. GENERATIONS OF CARTERS HAVE ATTENDED THE LITTLE CHURCH IN PLAINS, WHICH LIKE SIMILAR CHURCHES THROUGHOUT THE RURAL SOUTH IS AS MUCH A SOCIAL AND CIVIC CENTER

AS A PLACE OF WORSHIP. IN NINETEEN SIXTY-FIVE, MISTER CARTER TRIED TO END THE CHURCH'S POLICY ON RACIAL MATTERS, BUT HIS PROPOSAL WAS SOUNDLY REJECTED, AND THE CHURCH DOORS REMAINED CLOSED TO BLACKS.

FOR THE PAST DOZEN YEARS, THE AMERICAN SOUTH HAS UNDERGONE A SOCIAL REVOLUTION OF RADICAL PROPORTIONS. A SERIES OF LAWS HAVE STRUCK DOWN THE AGE-OLD PRACTICE OF SEGREGATION IN ALL PUBLI PLACES -- SCHOOLS, RESTAURANTS, HOTELS AND BUSES. BUT THE LAW HAD NO AFFECT ON SUCH PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS AS THE CHURCH, WHICH WAS AND STILL IS FREE TO MAKE ITS OWN MEMBERSHIP RULES.

THIS WAS ESPECIALLY TRUE OF THE BAPTIST CHURCH, WHICH WITH SOME TWENTY-EIGHT MILLION MEMBERS IS THE LARGEST PROTESTANT SECT IN THE UNITED STATES. THE BAPTISTS, FOUNDED BY RELIGIOUS DISSIDENTS, WHO OBJECTED TO RULES AND REGULATIONS IMPOSED BY A CHURCH HIERARCHY, HAVE TRADITIONALLY ALLOWED EACH INDIVIDUAL PARISH TO GOVERN ITSELF. AND IN MUCH OF THE SOUTH, WHERE THE BAPTISTS HAVE LONG FLOURISHED, THIS MEANT SEPARATE CHURCHES FOR WHITES AND BLACKS.

IN RECENT YEARS, MANY BAPTISTS CONGREGATIONS -- BOTH NORTH AND SOUTH -- HAVE CHANGED THEIR MEMBERSHIP RULES, AND NOW JIMMY CARTER'S CHURCH, ELEVEN YEARS AFTER HE RAISED THE ISSUE, HAS DONE THE SAME. THE TIMING COULD NOT HAVE BEEN BETTER FOR THE MAN WHO SOON LEAVES SOUTH GEORGIA FOR WASHINGTON AND FOR WHOM THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF PLAINS WILL REMAIN THE FAMILY PLACE OF WORSHIP.

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JS/CAK